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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 05 ASHGABAT 000407

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SUBJECT: DAS ROMANOWSKI SCENESETTER -- TURKMENISTAN AND ITS  
EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM, PROBLEMS AND OPPORTUNITIES

#### INTRODUCTION

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1. (SBU) Your visit to Turkmenistan is an opportunity to help determine whether recently-elected President Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov is serious about reform of the educational system or whether his pledge to improve education was more a cynical campaign ploy. Original enthusiasm over Berdimuhammedov's positive words vis-a-vis education has ebbed as his lackluster appointments to key education sector roles, continued harassment and obstruction to USG-sponsored programs, and overall tendency to revert to Niyazovian style habits have begun to form a bleaker outlook for reform. Your visit may involve more sticks than we originally had hoped, though we believe the carrots that U.S. educational programs provide, still will present an attractive alternative. End Summary.

#### BERDIMUHAMMEDOV TALKS THE TALK BUT BLOCKS THE WALK

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2. (SBU) Turkmenistan is a gas and oil-rich former Soviet republic in the midst of an historic opportunity to change. The unexpected death of President Niyazov on December 21, 2006, ended the authoritarian, on-man dictatorship that for 15 years made Turkmenistan among the most repressive countries in the world. The peaceful transfer of power following Niyazov's death confounded many who had predicted instability because of the former president's open-ended succession scenario. His successor, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov, quickly assumed power following Niyazov's death with the assistance of the "power ministries" -- including the Ministries of National Security and Defense -- but his position was, in fact, subsequently confirmed through a public multi-candidate election in which the population eagerly participated, even if it fell far short of international election standards.

3. (SBU) Since his inauguration on February 14, President Berdimuhammedov has cautiously started moderating Niyazov's cult-of-personality. Although one can still see pictures of the deceased president on all major buildings and references to Niyazov's literary works, especially the "Ruhnama," scattered around the city, the new president has banned the huge stadium gatherings

and requirement for students and government workers to line the streets, often for hours along presidential motorcade routes. Berdimuhammedov still pays lip service to maintaining his predecessor's policies, but he has begun talking about reversing many of the most destructive, especially in the areas of education, health and social welfare. The president has yet to address introducing the rule of law, correct Turkmenistan's abysmal human rights record, or promote economic reform, but he has told U.S. officials he wants to "turn the page" on the bilateral relationship and is willing to work on areas that hindered improved relations under Niyazov.

14. (SBU) U.S. policy in Turkmenistan is three-fold:

- Encourage democratic reform and increased respect for human rights, including support for improvements in the education and health systems;
- Encourage economic reform and growth of a market economy and private-sector agriculture, as well as diversification of Turkmenistan's energy export options;
- Promote security cooperation.

15. (SBU) Berdimuhammedov remains closely tied to Niyazov-era interest groups focused on self-preservation. Security cooperation, always the most welcomed form of USG assistance, continues at Niyazovian levels. The government has at minimum welcomed the idea of assistance in education, health and agriculture but even existing programs are stalled by bureaucracy and interference. The democratic and economic reforms the U.S. government promotes are stalled on every level. In the short term, the U.S. government is linking better bilateral relations and assistance in the areas where the regime wants development to gradual democratic and economic reform. For the longer term, the embassy is focusing on preparing the next generation of leaders and society in general with tools to build a more democratic, secure and prosperous nation.

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EDUCATION -- "DIMMER PEOPLE EASIER TO RULE"

16. (SBU) Niyazov's attacks on the educational system grew increasingly destructive in his later years. The Soviet-era educational system was broadly turned into a system designed to isolate pupils and students from the outside world and to mold them into loyal Turkmen-speaking presidential thralls. President Niyazov famously defended this policy when, in 2004, he told a fellow Central Asian President, "dimmer people are easier to rule."

RUHNAMA AS CURRICULUM

17. (SBU) Niyazov cut the Soviet standard of 10 years of compulsory education to 9, fired large numbers of teachers, and introduced his own works, most egregiously the "Ruhnama," as core curriculum percepts, at the expense of the traditional building blocks of a basic education. Following graduation from nine years of schooling, students were required to work for two years before applying to higher educational institutions. And most higher education programs were cut to only two years of study, with two years of additional work before receiving a degree. In a high-unemployment economy, most students were unable to satisfy any of these requirements and bribed their way through. Meanwhile some universities and programs were closed because there was "no reason to duplicate efforts." Enrollment for most higher education was slashed dramatically and entrance to universities was reportedly obtainable only by paying exorbitant bribes. All graduate programs were closed as well.

FOREIGN STUDY DISCOURAGED

18. (SBU) Given the lack of higher educational opportunities in Turkmenistan many chose to study abroad, but Niyazov discouraged this as well, determining that only foreign decrees obtained under programs he himself had approved, would be considered valid. Niyazov did not recognize credit obtained under the USG-funded UGRAD program or degrees from the USG-funded American University of

Central Asia in Kyrgyzstan. Any student returning to Turkmenistan from study abroad had to pass rigorous and reportedly arbitrary exams on the Ruhnama in order to have his/her degree recognized in the country.

#### EXCHANGE PROGRAMS ALSO DISCOURAGED

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¶9. (SBU) The Ministry of Education consistently found ways to disrupt and harass Turkmenistan's students who applied to USG exchange programs. In many cases, returning students could not re-enter their home universities. Disruption and harassment of FLEX program recruitment reached an all time during late 2006, precipitating a letter from SCA Assistant Secretary Boucher to President Niyazov requesting that testing be rescheduled in towns where the harassment and intimidation was highest.

#### LEARNING TURKMEN VIA THE RUHNAME

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¶10. (SBU) The official language of instruction in schools and universities is Turkmen. Because the language remains undeveloped after years of official Soviet Russification, there are very few textbooks in Turkmen for most basic fields of study. Due to the compulsory shift in recent years from Russian to Turkmen language in Latin script, very few textbooks exist at any level. University students usually study from notes based on lectures given by professors, or they use books, published during the Soviet period in Russian with Cyrillic script. Although Russian as a foreign language is still taught in schools, many educated in the Niyazov-era lack the Russian language skills of their predecessors and therefore lack access to the more plentiful and developed educational materials available in Russian. Many highly skilled teachers trained in the Soviet-era and lacking Turkmen language skills lost their jobs.

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#### NIYAZOV - "TURKMEN SHALL BE TRILINGUAL"

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¶11. (SBU) Officially schools are to teach the three languages decreed by President Niyazov: Turkmen, English, and Russian. In the past year, English instruction was in the process of being phased into many schools that had previously dropped their programs. Unfortunately, the shortage of qualified English teachers, a low awareness of teaching methodology, and poorly written and targeted Ministry of Education textbooks in English make standard classroom instruction ineffective. The English curriculum and textbooks essentially use translation exercises mostly with state propaganda as the material. Even the new Turkmen names of days and months established by Niyazov are used in English in textbooks. (Comment: In a school visit last year, the PAO was told of the lyrical English expression "Gurbansoltan showers bring Magtymguly Flowers")

#### THE GOLDEN CENTURY

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¶12. (SBU) Niyazov declared Turkmenistan as living in a "golden century" thanks to his leadership. Any discussion of problems or challenges was a sign of disloyalty. As a result, the government -- and especially the Ministry of Education -- would blindly deny that any problems existed. Although some societal problems have been noted by Berdimuhammedov, the tendency to be in denial of problems is still dominant. Niyazovian habits combined with inefficient bureaucracy continues to hinder reform in general, as well as the embassy's programs and proposals for new areas of cooperation.

#### BERDIMUHAMMEDOV REBUILDS THE SYSTEM HE HELPED DESTROY

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¶13. (SBU) During his presidential campaign, Berdimuhammedov announced plans for a variety of reforms that he characterized as Niyazov's long term plans. In education, these largely represent a reversal of Niyazov's education policy; the policy Niyazov ordered Berdimuhammedov to implement while serving as Deputy Chairman for

Education. Since his inauguration, Berdimuhammedov has ordered a return to the standard of 10 years of compulsory education, a return of universities to 5 years of classroom study, an end to the work requirement for applying to universities; and stressed the need for exchanges in order for Turkmenistanis to gain expertise abroad. Most of these changes are slated to begin in the coming school year.

¶14. (SBU) In early March an MOE contact informally asked the PAO for help in establishing a Government of Turkmenistan program to send students to U.S. undergraduate and graduate programs, similar to Kazakhstan's Bolashak program. This led to a brief flurry of excitement as PAS and the local ACCELS office offered proposals to start up the project during a period of unprecedented, informal access. Other foreign missions and international organizations have also been approached with similar requests for help from the ministry. However, in recent weeks that momentum has dissipated.

CULTURE = NIYAZOV  
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¶15. (SBU) All culture and news media also were used as tools in creating the Cult of Niyazov. Cultural aspects perceived as "Russian," "foreign," or "not compatible" with Turkmen character were banned, including ballet and opera. The Ministry of Culture and Television and Radio Broadcasting actively supported the cult-of-personality by focusing music, arts, and public performances almost exclusively on nationalistic themes and praise to Niyazov. Despite its propaganda role, the ministry still cooperated with the embassy in a number of cultural programs.

¶16. (SBU) The Ministry submitted numerous applications to the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation (AFCP) in recent years, and a total of seven such projects were funded. However until recently, the ministry avoided noting USG support in any of the AFCP projects, preferring not to waiver from the "golden age" message or admitting to USG assistance. In fact, the ministry once used video

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from the embassy's AFCP award ceremony in a nationalistic, propaganda piece for an international archeology conference. The video was edited and cropped in order to remove references to the AFCP and to keep the U.S. flag off-screen.

¶17. (SBU) Cultural programs such as the visit of a U.S. Hip Hop group in the summer of 2006 were reluctantly permitted by the government and often rife with obstacles and monitoring by government officials. When adequate time is allowed to advertise events, the general public enthusiastically attends embassy cultural events. In contrast, the ministry is accustomed to providing audiences for public events. School children and teachers are often involuntary audience members to sundry cultural and official events in order to assure that they are "successful." For many embassy programs problems arise when large, voluntary audiences are denied entry to performances because the given venue is already occupied by the "official" audience ordered to attend by the ministry.

POST-NIYAZOV CULTURE: THE POWER OF OLD HABITS?  
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¶18. (SBU) Since Niyazov's death, the ministry's broadcasting media has been more eager to cover embassy programs and events, including the embassy's African-American History month film festival, opened by a former aide of Martin Luther King, Jr. who talked about the power of people and protest. Newspapers have noted the AFCP in articles about historic sites. However, the ministry and the news media in general still carefully avoid any information that could imply criticism of the country's regime.

¶16. (SBU) In early April, the embassy brought "Yellow Bird," a Native American Dance Group to Turkmenistan in order to participate in the Ministry of Culture's first annual International Folk Festival. This was the first USG participation in such an event and it was broadly a success. However, in accordance with Niyazov-era policy, the ministry closed the ceremony with painfully long propaganda statements, which nationalistically glorified

Turkmenistan and its "great achievements," written by ministry officials, but read by the international performers.

¶17. (SBU) In addition, regional performances by U.S. cultural visitors have been hindered by provincial officials who either deny the visiting artists or to the public access to the central government-approved venue. In Mary, Yellow Bird eventually decided to perform on the front steps of a theater after large numbers of voluntary audience members were not allowed inside. Most recently, on April 19, the Ari Roland Jazz Quartet, was denied access to its venue in Turkmenbashi City, until one and a half hours after scheduled, and only following a flurry of phone calls including to the Charge who was in a meeting with the Foreign Minister.

#### NIYAZOV INTERNET POLICY: NO INTERNET

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¶18. (SBU) Although Internet was officially available through state-owned Turkmen Telecom, in 2002 new accounts for private individuals were no longer available. The connection was dial-up only with slow connection speeds and high prices. There was only one Internet caf in the entire country, and only foreign entities or governments were granted permission for two-way satellite internet access.

¶19. (SBU) Prior to Niyazov's death, three of five Internet Access and Training Program (IATP) centers were closed due to hesitant local partners and government pressure. To date, none have been re-opened, although efforts continue. In a separate issue it took two years for the government to grant Peace Corps a satellite dish for Internet, making Peace Corps Turkmenistan the last Peace Corps program in the world to upgrade from dial-up Internet.

#### POST-NIYAZOV INTERNET: INTERNET ON GOVERNMENT TERMS

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¶20. (SBU) Among his reform proposals, Berdimuhammedov announced his intention to establish widespread internet access for the public and

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in schools. State newspapers published articles about the Internet and its uses.

¶21. (SBU) Immediately following Berdimuhammedov's inauguration on February 14, the first two state internet cafes opened in Ashgabat. In the following weeks a handful more opened around the capital and in regional cities. Use of the internet cafes is low. Staff in some cafes estimate only three or four users a day. Varying connection speeds are available at \$4/hour, which makes it prohibitively expensive for most locals. At times soldiers were seen standing guard in front of cafes, but this does not appear to be a consistent policy. Users must present ID before proceeding. RFE/RL appears widely available, but opposition websites, including Gundogar, are blocked. Far from the positive tone set during the first days of Berdimuhammdov's administration, these cafes appear to serve more as a way for the government to monitor Internet use, than an initiative to make it broadly available to the public.

¶22. (SBU) Meanwhile, the outlook for IATP has changed little despite appearance of a supportive official policy. IATP is still struggling with cowed partners and host government officials who are dragging their feet on permitting the re-opening of at the centers in Ashgabat, Balkanabat and Dashoguz.

#### COMMENT

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¶23. (SBU) Berdimuhammedov's campaign promises and early steps toward reform, are now being drowned out by increasing indications that he is either finding old habits hard to break or becoming more comfortable taking on the unattractive trappings of Niyazovian rule. Embassy Ashgabat looks forward to your visit for the further light it will shed on the capacity and will of the Berdimuhammedov government to open up Turkmenistan and her people to the world. End Comment.

